

SEAN P. DUFFY
7TH DISTRICT, WISCONSIN



COMMITTEE ON
FINANCIAL SERVICES
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CHAIRMAN, HOUSING AND INSURANCE
CAPITAL MARKETS, SECURITIES AND
INVESTMENTS

WASHINGTON
2330 RAYBURN HOUSE OFFICE BUILDING
WASHINGTON, DC 20515-4907
PH: (202) 225-3365 • TOLL-FREE: 1-855-585-4251
WEBSITE: duffy.house.gov

Congress of the United States
House of Representatives

April 28, 2017

Secretary Betsy DeVos
U.S. Department of Education
400 Maryland SW
Washington, D.C. 20202-5900

Dear Secretary DeVos:

Institutions of higher education should be champions of tolerance and free speech. As a father of eight, I fully expect my children to have the opportunity to study with our nation's best and brightest in a setting that allows them to develop new ideas and challenge conventional wisdom. As a lawmaker, my role is to guarantee that public universities provide protections for these settings, especially on taxpayer-funded campuses that are supposed to promote diversity of thought and ideologies.

Sadly, too many colleges have failed to uphold such protections on multiple occasions, and President Obama's tenure was marked by a litany of inexcusable actions by university officials picking and choosing when to allow free speech. Unfortunately, the Obama Administration's refusal to intervene has emboldened university officials to continue this type of discrimination in President Trump's term. Make no mistake, this threat to free speech undermines the excellence of the American education system and our society as a whole.

On April 12, 2017, members of Young America's Foundation at University of California, Berkeley, received a notice from university officials that their invited speaker, Conservative pundit Ann Coulter, would not be allowed to speak. The event was set to take place on UC Berkeley's taxpayer-funded campus and was cancelled citing safety concerns amidst violent protests organized by radical liberal activist groups. Berkeley has since taken a new stance, choosing instead to limit Ms. Coulter's exposure by arbitrarily rescheduling the event during a crucial study period for students.

I am deeply concerned by the decision of UC Berkeley to suppress free speech on a campus that claims to be a champion of the Free Speech Movement. Moreover, I am appalled by the double standard of tolerance that UC Berkeley and other campuses have embraced, which is to allow the free exchange of any and all ideas, except when those ideas challenge their own. If university officials feel that it is their priority to keep students safe, they should do so by addressing the culture of violence that accompanies these lawless riots, not by suppressing the constitutional rights of everyday American citizens. By cancelling the original event, UC Berkeley has sent a clear and disturbing message to protesters everywhere: continue the violence and you will win.

WAUSAU
208 GRAND AVENUE
WAUSAU, WI 54403
PH: (715) 298-9344 • FAX: (715) 298-9348

HUDSON
502 2ND STREET, SUITE 202
HUDSON, WI 54016
PH: (715) 808-8160 • FAX: (715) 808-8167

HAYWARD
15954 RIVERS EDGE DRIVE, SUITE 206
HAYWARD, WI 54843
PH: (715) 392-3984 • FAX: (715) 392-3999

Even in my home state of Wisconsin, university officials are increasingly fostering environments that encourage intolerance of conservative views. On January 30, 2017, University of Wisconsin-La Crosse Chancellor Joe Gow sent a troubling email condemning President Trump's efforts to safeguard our country from foreign terrorists. Chancellor Gow noted in his email that, "At UWL, we do not discriminate based on a person's religion or country of origin." Later that month, a campus police officer at UWL was fired for expressing her views in defense of President Trump.

These instances of partisan education are not rare. Students tell me all the time that they spend four years enduring rather than learning, and never once have the opportunity to study under a conservative professor. So many campuses have become incubators of exclusionary liberalism that breed groupthink and shaming rather than collaboration and inclusion.

I implore you to be mindful of these politically intolerant environments that our taxpayer dollars are funding throughout the United States, and to take any and all necessary action to prevent this systematic suppression of free speech. Universities are a place for our best and brightest to be educated, not indoctrinated.

To address these issues, I appreciate if you provide a set of specific actions the Department of Education can take to ensure that taxpayer-funded institutions of higher education create and support a fair environment that protects speech and fosters dialogue. I would also appreciate specific recommendations that Congress can enact to ensure that laws governing these institutions foster an honest, equitable, and fair discussion of political issues and thought.

Any attempts to undermine the political will of our youth—regardless of their political affiliation—should be weeded out and condemned. I fear that recent pressures to promote tolerance have become so extreme that the result has been the exact opposite. I refuse to support the perverse incentives that allow these trends to continue. We are a country founded on the principles of liberty and free speech; we must adhere to these principles through all walks of life.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "S.P. Duffy", with a stylized flourish at the end.

Sean P. Duffy
Member of Congress